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Changes in rural education and rural schools are illustrated by examining the reorganization-consolidation process. Factors which have contributed to consolidation are universal public education, compulsory attendance laws, the economic depression, improved transportation, state legislation, and rising costs of operating small school districts. Local control and teacher opposition have been deterring factors. Similarities and differences in state reorganization procedures are discussed. The educational benefits of consolidation are used to point out that hoped for results are actually derived in this process. (SW)

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THE CONSOLIDATION OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

BY R.M. Isenberg and Karl-Heinz Taudien

The most easily observable educational development among the smaller communities and rural areas throughout the United States has been the reorganization of school districts and establishment of consolidated schools. In a period of 30 years, this process has brought a reduction of the total number of school administative units from more than 125,000 to less than 30,000. In some states the number of school units has been reduced more than 90 percent. This major overhaul of our rural school structure got underway about 1935 when the nation was in the midst of a serious economic depression. Much of what has been accomplished, however, is more recent. Efforts to reorganize and results from these efforts have been greatest since 1950. The process is still going on.

There have been other educational changes in rural areas and some of them may be more significant as far as school improvement is concerned. There has been a gradual but continuous replacement of poorly trained teachers. New approaches to instruction have been developed. Many kinds of instructional materials are now available and are being utilized. But these changes are more intangible, their contributions to the educational process more abstract. People know about and can see the consolidated school.

Any explanation of understanding of what has happened must take into account a number of factors which seemed to come together at about the same time. In combination they created a pressure for consolidation which seemed to emerge in almost every section of the country at about the same time. Some of the major contributing factors can be identified briefly.

Universal public education at the elementary school level began almost simultaneously with the establishment of their new nation. The objective of that day was to make schools accessible, within walking distance for every child. This resulted in the creation of thousands and thousands of small schools and small school districts--a pattern that changed very little for more than 100 years.

The public secondary school developed throughout the United States in the period between 1870 and 1900. Its purpose during those years was primarily the preparation of students for college and university admission. It was not until well into this century that public secondary education became universal as a result of compulsory attendance laws.

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The tendency was for these secondary schools to be established in the cities and villages. They were seldom located in rural areas. Any rural student who might wish to attend a public secondary school was required to do so by enrolling in the nearest secondary school that would accept him. Almost always tuition charges were made. Often the student was required to live away from home during the school term.

When secondary school attendance became compulsory, state laws tended to place responsibility for its provision directly upon the school district where the student was resident. Very few of these local districts operated a secondary school. There developed, then, for a period of years, a pattern when often as many as 50 or more small school districts would all contrast with the same city or village to provide secondary education for their children. Because each elementary district might have only one or two secondary school students, it was not feasible for most of them to establish a secondary school program and usually it was not burdensome for some nearby secondary school to accept them. The tuition as wellaas state subsidies was most welcome. The pattern did create a system whereby rural people tended to have no voice in determining the policies or program for the school which their children attended. If they became dissatisfied, their only alternatives were to express their disatisfaction or to find another secondary school willing to accept their students on a contract basis. They had no direct control or influence.

A more significant result of compulsory secondary school attendance than the development of the "contract system" was the fact that many of those by then attending a secondary school were either unsuited for or not interested in preparing themselves for college admission. Yet the educational offering was frequently limited to this sole objective. Many students, a majority in most instances, were misfits for the program the school provided. Where the secondary schools were sufficiently large to afford the extra costs, a more comprehensive program including vocational courses, music, art, and other terminal offerings was developed. But most of the secondary schools were small and could not afford such variation of program.

By the early 1930's, the country was deep in an economic depression. The high costs of small school districts were a luxury many people felt could not be afforded. This concern coupled with their inadequacies was picked up by educational leaders who began vigorously to promote school consolidation. Another important factor added fuel to this pressure.

The school bus and the transportation of pupils from home to school had been developed during the years of the "contract system." With transportation by this time more than just an experiment and a nationwide effort to provide hard-surfaced all-weather roads well on its way, school consolidation was for the first time feasible in a substantial way. It was begun. The merits of the consolidated school were acknowledged by state legislatures and laws establishing consolidation procedures and financial incentives were enacted. Rural communities responded. The results are reported earlier. The motivation which brought results was sometimes the need for better schools, the financial incentives where these were provided, the pressure of neighbors or consolidation promoters, the promise of reduced taxes, and, in some instances, the logic of the proposal.

Experience, and recently some significant research, demonstrate conclusively that many of the hoped for results do actually derive from consolidation. Broader curricular opportunities are provided, better qualified teachers can be attracted, better buildings and equipment and more instructional materials are made available, and better administrative leadership and supervision are afforded. Seldom have school costs been decreased. The important result from the greater efficiency of the consolidated school is that all of its advantages can be realized without any appreciable increase over the cost of operating an inadequate school.

It should not be concluded from the foregoing description that effort to combine school districts and consolidate schools has been an easy process. In community after community it has been resisted vigorously by some. State laws have been contested in the courts and declared unconstitutional. Consolidation proposals have been voted down time after time. The most commonly expressed reason for opposing consolidation is that it takes control of the school away from local people. It does, in fact, put control on a larger area basis. Les frequently expressed but often more commanding is the fear that taxes will be increased. Because a uniform tax is extablished over the entire area of the reorganized district, the actual result may indeed be a tax increase for those previously enjoying a tax advantage because of some favorable valuation in the small district. For others the tax for schools may well be less after consolidation.

Not infrequently teachers are among those who oppose consolidation. Their motives may be different. Some are accustomed to an almost complete lack of supervision in their small schools. They view consolidation as

a threat to their freedom and flexibility. Many are totally without experience in a larger school system and fear whatever it is that is unfamiliar to them. Some of those with low qualifications become opponents because their lack of adequate professional preparation would not be accepted in a consolidated school.

There are variations among states in the specific details of procedures by which school districts may be combined. In some, for example, people vote in each school district separately and a majority approval in all of them is required for the proposal to carry. In other states, a majority approval by the voters of the proposed new district is sufficient. Some other states have still different requirements. In one important way, however, the laws of all states are alike. Once a new district is established by voters approval, the former districts go out of existence. A new legal entity is created. The formerly existing districts no longer have any legal basis. This kind of provision gives permanency to every new district. The same consolidation proposal may be voted down a dozen times; but once approved, the new district created cannot be dissolved by vote. It may later be merged with another district or otherwise altered, but once it is established there is no way by which it can be broken into the same or similar districts which combined in its formation. This kind of provision may seem somewhat severe, but it has never been seriously questioned. The reason might be found in the fact that everywhere reorganization has taken place, people have tended to be satisfied with the results. Even where a proposal has been vigorously contested, a few years after the new district has been put in operation it will be difficult to find anyone who will admit to having been put in operation it will be difficult to find anyone who will admit to having been in opposition. Those who once were opponents take pride in what has been accomplished.

The reorganization-consolidation process has been underway long enough that rural education in the United States is almost completely different from what it was a generation ago. The one-teacher school, for more than a century the symbol of education in rural areas, is no longer common. In its place along every highway is a modern school of brick and glass. Rural students may ride the school bus 5 or 20 or 50 miles to attend this school. But they do. And the educational program available to them makes the ride worthwhile.